TEACHING CHILDREN THE THIRD COMMANDMENT

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy god in vain.”

INTRODUCTION:

The full statement of the Third Commandment includes a special warning that the other Commandments do not:

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.”

That sounds serious! Jesus felt that treating God’s name with respect was so important to remember that he asked us to pray “Hallowed be thy name.”

Why is this such a critical Commandment when, for most people, it is saying nothing more than “don’t swear using God’s name.” Judging from everyday life and entertainment media, God’s name is tossed about casually by a large segment of society. It is an easy habit to slip into if not properly guarded against. But the Third Commandment means much more than that, and the underlying message is an important one for children to learn and practice.

What does taking God’s name “in vain” mean? The word “vain” describes something that is worthless, empty, hollow, unsuccessful. If we do something “in vain” our actions would be a waste of effort.

For instance, if we find ourselves speaking God’s name in a way that is disrespectful to God, such as when someone curses or swears, we are taking His name “in vain.”

If we try to use God’s name, or words about Him, to cover up evil or impure thoughts in our heart, we are taking His name “in vain.”

If we promise to do something in “God’s name” and we break that promise knowingly and willingly, we are taking His name “in vain.”

If our words about God do not match what is in our hearts and minds and lives, we may be taking His name “in vain.”

Below are some ideas for teaching this Commandment in Sunday School classes and at home with your children. These are not crafty projects but ideas to get them to think about and absorb the meaning of the Third Commandment.

FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Here is a brief explanation in simpler words, though some ideas may still be too hard for little children to grasp. This is taken from my book found elsewhere on this site. Links are at bottom of this essay.
"Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain’ means that we should not use God’s name as if it had magical powers, for good or bad, just by being spoken. For instance, it is wrong to call out the name of God if you are angry at something or someone. That is called ‘swearing’ or ‘cursing,’ and it not only dishonors God, it is also unloving and impolite to others. We do not use God’s name lightly or jokingly. We do not speak certain favorite words about Him over and over again, thinking that just saying the word will help us or heal us. Our goal is to have what we think, what we feel, what we say, and what we do, all flow from the same truth.

The Third Commandment helps us to grow in our usefulness to God and to mankind. Why? Because we would only speak of God when we are ready to speak from our heart. Our words would come from the truth we really know and use, and would bring joy and healing to all who hear us. Our lives would be like trees that give good fruit, providing nourishment to all who welcome what we have to offer.

OLDER CHILDREN AND TEENS

You can begin lessons using the explanations of what taking God’s name in vain means from the Introduction as well as from the Young Children’s section.

Young people seem to be attuned to what they perceive as hypocrisy in adults, that is, saying one thing or insisting on certain behaviors for their children, but doing another in their own lives. We will see below how Jesus felt the same way about the Jewish authorities of his time, who often portrayed themselves as godly, but in their hearts were not. Children need to learn how to detect hypocrisy among their peers and others, too, as well as themselves. This is a matter of protection. The old saying “you can’t judge a book by its cover” is worthwhile to teach kids. It describes how people are not always what they appear to be on the outside.

We want our children to learn how to pause before acting and speaking if they know they are not ready to tell it like it really is. This will help discipline them not to use God’s name carelessly, or in moments of anger, as if using His name added force to their feelings. Maybe find substitute silly words for them to use in those times of frustration.

Some older pupils in Sunday School might be interested in a bit of Biblical historical background on the Third Commandment. While the common thought today is that the Third Commandment is simply a prohibition of swearing and curse words, the following paragraphs from the *Interpreter's Bible Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, offers commentary on the subject showing otherwise:

"The Third Commandment deals with the use of Yahweh's name in vain, i.e., for that which lacks reality or truth. The name of God expresses his character and power. To call upon unreality, i.e., that which is not an expression of the divine character, by means of the divine name is to use the name in vain. Not only perjury, but also the practice of magic, which constitutes the invocation of ultimate powers with whom God stands in conflict, and the invocation of the dead, were in all probability among the specific prohibitions implied by this commandment at its inception.
"The misuse of the divine name was especially heinous among people who believe that the name was an essential part of the personality. The very naming of the name invoked the power of the whole person of whom the name was a part. The magic use of the divine name seems to have lingered on among people who were only beginning to know that true religion is more nearly related to moral action than to magic formulas. The magic use of the name was frowned upon as a part of a campaign to banish superstitious ideas and practices from the people. There may be reference here also to swearing falsely by God, and to light and blasphemous use of the divine name. We still are subject to both kinds of temptations, to belief in the miraculous power of sacred names, and to the blasphemous use of holy names.

"Every minister is tempted to cater to the primitive urge on the part of some in the congregation to hear over and over again certain magic formulas which seem to them to guarantee soundness of faith and comfortable doctrine. Whether the phrase is "the blood of Jesus" or "the brotherhood man," it is merely magical when it is used as a spell. Religion for many people consists in the good feelings aroused by the repetition of certain beloved formulas. This type of piety can be recognized by its extreme harshness in the denunciation of those who do not use them. It is not an easy type of religion for others to live with. Its sin is disobedience to the Third Commandment, which forbids the cheap and easy use of the divine name to cover up poverty of real thought and feeling.

"Common cursing and swearing are due to the desire on the part of inarticulate people to impress others. The easiest way to shock another person into attention seems to be by the use of some particularly sacred and holy name. But the effect wears off almost immediately, and blasphemy simply becomes a boring habit, an expression of impotence and weakness."

Note that the name of God really indicated His nature or character. In addition to not using his name thoughtlessly, we should not cloak ourselves with the appearance of Godlike qualities or attributes for less than honest reasons.

**JESUS AND THE THIRD COMMANDMENT**

Jesus denounced hypocrites. In his time, two groups of people known as the scribes and Pharisees were often condemned by Jesus. These Jews were critical of everyone who did not follow the Jewish laws and customs perfectly, even though they themselves often secretly broke the laws. Even worse, they broke higher laws of God that Jesus taught by being unmerciful, self-righteous, and unkind to others who struggled hard to do the right thing. Jesus admonished them:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and inequity.” (Matthew 23:27-28)
In order to avoid our own hypocrisy in our relation to God, Jesus offers instructions for our prayers in his Sermon on the Mount:

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men . . . But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.” (Matthew 6:5-7)

Note: make sure your students understand that the “closet” is metaphor for their consciousness, and not that Jesus expects them to shut themselves up in their actual closet, though sometimes that could be a good place to get some quiet time alone with God! If there is room, of course.

Another use of God’s name, where it might be taken “in vain” is with regard to oaths. For instance, explain to students that in courts of law, witnesses are asked to swear on the Bible. They may have heard something like this in a TV show: “Do you swear that the evidence you are about to give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

Witnesses are expected to honor this oath and not lie. In our private life we should not hide behind such casual oaths as “I swear to God that . . .”, for instance. Our life should be so honestly lived that we would not need to say that. Our simple statements should stand upon our integrity and trustworthiness and not require an embellishment using God’s name.

Here are the words of Jesus on this matter, again from his Sermon on the Mount:

“Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths: But I say unto you, swear not at all: neither by heaven: for it is God’s throne . . . Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your communication be, Yea, yea: Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.” (Matthew 5:33-37)

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

With all that in mind, here are some suggestions for questions to ask your pupils in Sunday School class to get a discussion going. Most of these questions are more suitable for older children and teenagers. Use these to get the pupils to think deeply, and express their opinions. Guide them along, if necessary, to possible answers, without telling them their own answers are wrong. Let yourself be surprised!

What would you do if one of your parents habitually uses God's name while swearing or cursing? What should we do? Should we speak to them about it? How can we best do that? Does a parent using profanity give us the right to do so, as well?

What if one of our good friends uses profanity? How might we handle that?

Is there any value to memorizing Bible verses or other inspirational statements, even if there is
no meaning for us when we first do so? Why or why not?

If your parents are forcing you to say "your prayers" at night or in the morning, do we have a right to protest doing so, if we do not feel like praying? What might be the motives of a parent who asks their child to say prayers every day? What will you do when you have your own children to raise? How would you encourage them to get to know God?

Is there any value to public group prayers -- such as saying the Lord's Prayer out loud at a church service? Explain why you feel that way.

What steps might we take to get past "just saying the words" in a Bible verse, or other statements of truth, and start to feel, or connect with, the underlying idea or message?

In American courts of law, people who take the witness stand are first asked to place their hands on a Bible and "swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God." Do you think this action stops everyone from lying in court? Do you think if a person does not believe in God or the Bible, he doesn't have to take this oath seriously? Why is it so important for people to keep this oath?

Is there any situation where it might be right for us to go to war, or kill, or hate, anyone "in the name of God"?

Should we judge a particular religion or denomination by what they believe, or how they use the name of God or by how some of its adherents behave, especially those who may be hypocritical? Why or why not? Should we even make judgments about the value of other religions? Can we really know what is in the hearts of others?

In the Bible story of the woman taken in adultery, we see Jesus treat the woman with mercy and compassion, even though she broke the Seventh Commandment. However, as you can read in Matthew 23, Jesus was very angry with the Pharisees because of their hypocrisy, and called them all kinds of terrible names! Why would Jesus be tougher on them for breaking the Third Commandment, than he was for the woman who broke the Seventh? Why might religious hypocrisy be seen as a worse sin?

Is it possible in this day and age to be obedient to this Third Commandment, when we are faced with so many people and so many characters in movies or TV shows who swear, or abuse God’s name? How should we behave when others make light of God, joke about Him or use His name in anger? Are we guilty if we laugh along with them? It’s one thing to ignore the behavior of others, but how should we conduct ourselves around others who habitually take God’s name in vain?
Final point. Practicing the Third Commandment (as is the same with any of the Ten Commandments) is not always a “black and white” matter. As Jesus taught us, these Commandments given to Moses, are to be fulfilled in LOVE, and a dose of common sense. If we try to force ourselves and others to be perfect humans, sticklers for the law, we may lose our ability to think for ourselves, and to render good judgment and mercy when called for.

With these lessons repeated over the years, it is hoped that your children or students can take to heart that God’s name, or nature, is to be respected and not used “in vain” or thoughtlessly.

TEACHING THE THIRD COMMANDMENT TO CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PUPILS

For those parents or Sunday School teachers interested in lessons on the Third Commandment based upon the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science and Author of the Christian Science textbook Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, the following are links to individual lessons found in my books First Lessons in Christian Science, Volume One: The Ten Commandments. Some of the lessons have been quoted already in the sections above.

The Third Commandment - For Young Children
What does taking God’s name "in vain" mean?
What can we do to make God’s name special?
What is wrong with just saying prayers? After all, we say the Lord’s Prayer out loud at church services?
How did Jesus teach the Third Commandment?
How can we get rid of hypocrisy in our prayers, so that they will be worthwhile and not in vain?
How can we improve our obedience to the Third Commandment?
Is it wrong to take an oath, or swear something, in God’s name?
Would obeying the Third Commandment help you to heal?